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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 8527  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3206  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 001746

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL KPAO PK

SUBJECT: DRL ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER'S CALL ON MINISTER OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING

1. (SBU) Summary: Minister of Information Rehman told DRL Assistant Secretary Kramer April 21 that Pakistan's new government seeks

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"coalition, not collision," and is working to keep the transition moving forward with minimal disruption from political squabbles. She acknowledged the need to address extremism as a Pakistani problem, and described a broad agenda of social reforms as well as the need to manage expectations about how quickly the new government can accomplish those changes. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Minister Rehman congratulated A/S Kramer on his new post and said the GOP "hopes we can make headway" on issues in the DRL portfolio. Kramer stressed that he was in Pakistan to determine how the U.S. can help in these areas and to underscore the multifaceted nature of our relationship. Rehman identified the foremost challenges as economic and political stability, as well as establishing the writ of law and order. The new coalition government is "educating" the public that the current economic and security problems are legacies from the previous government, and asking for "breathing space" to move forward with a national consensus and manage expectations. Those expectations, she added, include access to state services and resources, with more pressure on the new government than on its predecessors to deliver.

¶3. (SBU) A/S Kramer asked Rehman whether the parliamentary election result had more to do with political or economic concerns. She judged that both mattered - economic deprivation mobilized voter turnout, while "engagement in the national political discourse" motivated voters as well. She proudly said people voted for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and its coalition partners as a way to improve the economy, protect the country from terrorists, empower women, and gain freedom from fear and hunger - a state of affairs that she described as "the old Pakistan." She stressed that the people of Pakistan had voted for the "progressive agenda" of the PPP, and expressed determination not to let opposition minority parties distract attention from that agenda. When the DCM asked about cooperation within the coalition, she commented that despite agreement on overarching goals, keeping a balance is a "tightrope act" that requires considerable time and attention.

¶4. (SBU) Rehman said the November 2007 State of Emergency "tipped the scales" toward the opposition and "took the sheen off" President Musharraf's claims to political legitimacy. "The way the judges were sacked turned the tide in a big way," she opined. She told A/S Kramer the religious parties' poor electoral showing was due in part to less "noise" from Afghanistan and thus less radicalization, but

also less vote-rigging than in 2002; in that election, she said, the MMA got 30 to 40 percent of its victories through rigging.

¶ 15. (SBU) Rehman cited combating extremism as the late PPP leader Benazir Bhutto's top priority, and acknowledged the need to change the discourse about extremism to put the focus on Pakistan's need to act. "We need to own this (extremism) - it is a bigger problem for us than anyone else," she said, and if some areas of Pakistan provide sanctuary for extremists, the government will be obliged to deny them territory. She said the government will seek to "decommission" extremist elements they can reach, but recognized that there are certain redlines, and said they will not negotiate with terrorists.

¶ 16. (SBU) A/S Kramer and the DCM noted the extensive USG support for the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the entire electoral process, and asked about future plans for the ECP. Rehman said creating an independent ECP - headed by a commissioner with a backbone and strong laws to support him or her -- is a major coalition goal, and that in the next two months the issue will go to parliamentary committees to start discussing the constitutional changes that would be required. She expressed admiration for India's election commission, which she noted had benefited greatly from USAID capacity-building assistance.

¶ 17. (SBU) She affirmed that the new government is rolling back media restrictions imposed under the State of Emergency, and said she plans a stakeholders' conference in May on freedom of expression laws, giving media sectors a chance to air their views and encouraging their buy-in for reforms. She sees helping the media dismantle state controls as part of her job. She asked for U.S. help with media training, especially to develop journalists' "literacy" on human rights and democracy, and to refocus journalists on these issues at a deeper level than just covering the news of the day. She also asked for help in establishing an Islamabad press club, for

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which the GOP will provide space. The DCM suggested a visit by leaders of Washington's National Press Club to provide guidance in setting up a counterpart here. A/S Kramer recommended reaching out to major international news organizations for financial support or facilitation.

¶ 18. (SBU) The DCM urged Rehman to keep the new government working on women's rights as an early priority, and to set goals with benchmarks that outside observers can track. Rehman said the government refers extensively to the Report on Country Human Rights Practices, and floated the possibility of creating a Ministry of Human Rights separate from its current place within the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Human Rights.

¶ 19. (SBU) On the ongoing issue of deposed judges, Rehman told A/S Kramer there may be closure within a week. She said the government has been weighing measures such as fixed terms of office for judges, higher salaries, and more respect for the profession to show that the state values the judiciary. She and A/S Kramer also discussed the need for a more consistent system of justice in the tribal areas, making sure that people have recourse to the Pakistan penal code rather than only to Sharia. She mentioned the recent stoning of a couple accused of adultery and said her efforts to get the media to focus on the incident led to terrorist threats against her.

¶ 110. (SBU) She said parliamentary committees will be in place by the end of the week (noting that the previous National Assembly took two years to get its committee system set up) and that opposition members will chair some committees, although committees dealing with human rights and women's issues will remain under PPP control. She also mentioned a plan to wire the National Assembly building so private broadcast channels can cover events live when committee chairs want to open their proceedings to the media.

¶ 111. (SBU) Comment: Rehman mentioned that officials in the new government are giving up their party offices, but also said she remains the head of policy for the PPP. A former journalist, she is very clearly engaged in image-building for the new government; earlier in the day she had arranged the Prime Minister's first major

international media interview, with Newsweek. End comment.

¶12. (U) This message has been cleared by A/S Kramer.

PATTERSON